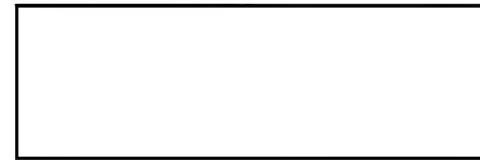


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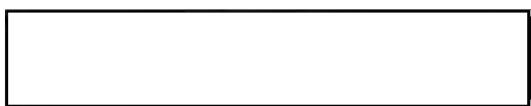
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Central Intelligence Bulletin

Top Secret

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28 March 1969



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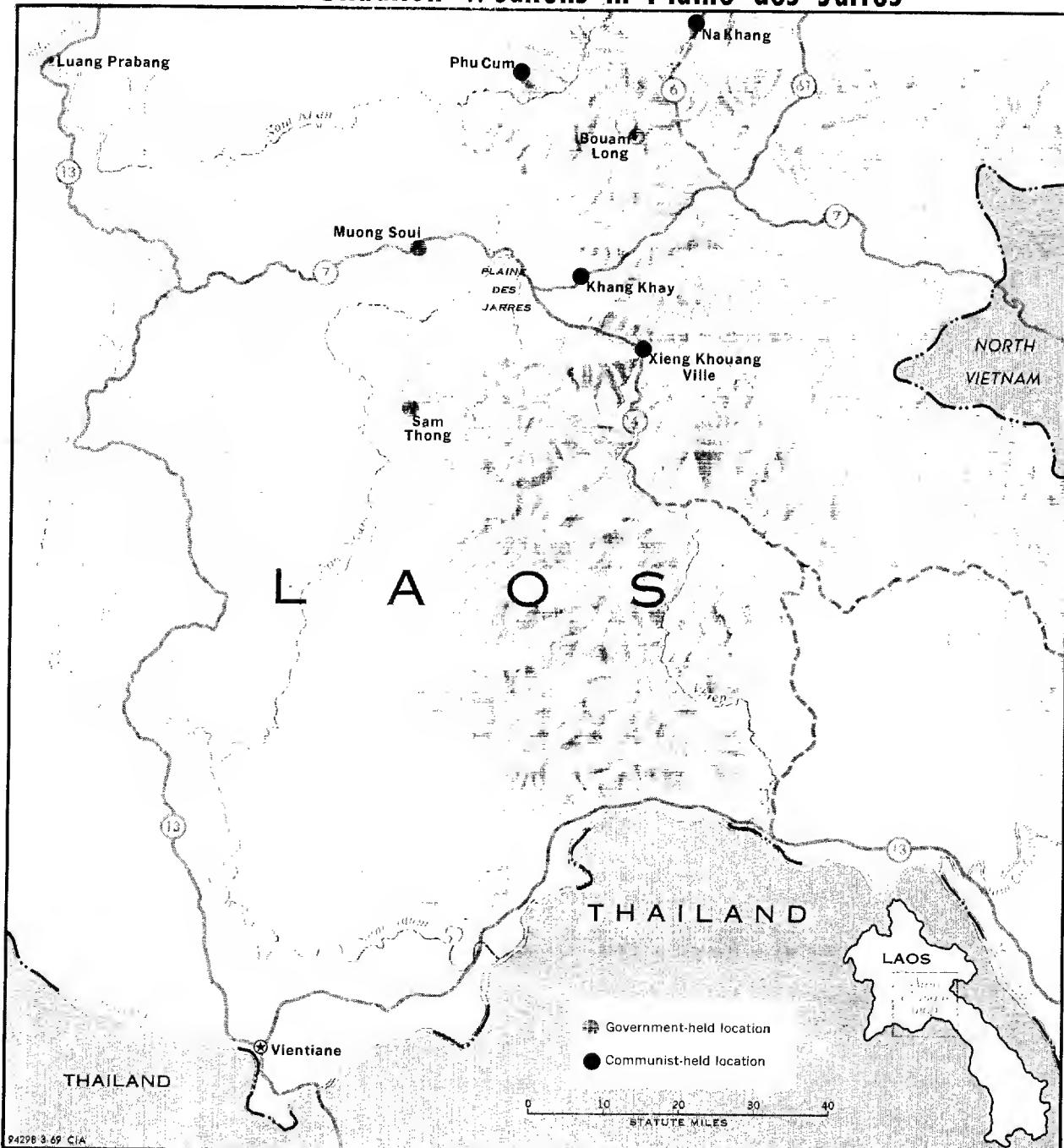
28 March 1969

*Central Intelligence Bulletin**CONTENTS*

Laos: Apprehension is growing in Vientiane over
Communist successes north of the Plaine des Jarres.
(Page 4)

Next 4 Page(s) In Document Exempt

Laotian Government Situation Weakens in Plaine des Jarres



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Laos: Apprehension continues to rise in Vientiane as the Communists nibble away at the government positions north of the Plaine des Jarres.

Prime Minister Souvanna has asked US officials to extend the bombing campaign near the Plaine to include military targets in the Communist-held towns of Khang Khay and Xieng Khouang Ville. For political reasons, both towns have been more or less off limits to attacks in the past. Souvanna, who apparently has the acquiescence of King Savang for the new initiative, has asked that an effort still be made to avoid striking the Chinese Communist mission in Khang Khay.

Souvanna's request followed a gloomy cabinet meeting devoted to the military situation in the northeast. Lao military leaders believe that the enemy's attacks north of the Plaine are a prelude to an assault against the neutralist headquarters at Muong Soui and Meo leader Vang Pao's headquarters at Sam Thong.

The Communists, aware that the morale of government forces in the northeast is shattered, are attempting to clear the guerrillas from areas they have long considered "liberated." The loss of Phu Cum on 25 March, under circumstances suggesting that the important position was abandoned by jittery guerrillas, is a recent example of how the Communists are achieving their objectives with a minimum of effort.

The longer range objectives of the current offensive are not nearly so clear. Communist forces positioned on the Plaine have long had the capability of taking Muong Soui, which is poorly defended, whenever they chose. Loss of this outpost would not substantially increase the threat to the neutralist headquarters. In addition, many of the small-scale attacks over the past week apparently have been undertaken not by North Vietnamese troops newly arrived from the campaign in Samneua Province,

but by Pathet Lao, dissident neutralist, and North Vietnamese troops that have been in the area for some time.

The Communists may be preparing for a significant push into government-held areas, but so far their actions in the northeast have not been significantly different from those which have characterized the war in this area over the past five years.

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28 Mar 69

Central Intelligence Bulletin

5

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Next 9 Page(s) In Document Exempt

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Top Secret

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